Can Philosophy Solve Its Own Problems?

by William J. Rapaport

". . . even the rabble without doors may judge from the noise and clamour, which they hear, that all goes not well within. There is nothing which is not the subject of debate, and in which men of learning are not of contrary opinions. The most trivial question excapes not our controversy, and in the most momentous we are not able to give any certain decision. Disputes are multiplied, as if every thing was certain. . . . From hence in my opinion arises that common prejudice against metaphysical reasonings of all kinds . . . ."

So said the Scottish philosopher David Hume some 250 years ago, in *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Hume was not the first, and surely will not be the last, to decry the apparent contentiousness of philosophers. Philosophy has long considered itself a "science," yet, unlike other sciences — notably, physics and mathematics — it has never seemed to make any "progress." No philosopher ever seems to agree with any other.

Consider some of the most famous philosophical disputes — all dating from at least the times of the ancient Greek philosophers, all still the current rage:

☐ Are people free, hence responsible for their acts? Or are we deterministic — our acts the inevitable results of virtually unalterable physical and psychological laws, thus freeing us from all responsibility (and, not incidentally, providing a foundation for the insanity defense)? Philosophers — indeed most people who have thought about the problem — have tended to believe three things:

(1) If an act is genuinely free, then it was not causally determined.
(2) People do (sometimes) act freely.
(3) All human acts are causally determined by the laws of physics, biology, psychology, etc.

There are — or, at least, there seem to be — good reasons for believing each of the three claims. For example, (1) seems simply to spell out part of the very meaning of 'free,' (2) seems to be supported by our everyday experiences, and (3) seems to be a consequence of our scientific understanding of nature. Yet the three claims are logically inconsistent: If you believe any two of them, you cannot rationally believe the third. From time to time, as fashions change or new arguments (based on newly observed subtleties) are urged upon us, one or the other of the three stands in disfavor; but always, strong voices speak out on their behalf.

☐ Can we ever know anything for certain? Or is skepticism the most rational attitude for an intelligent person? Here, too — as philosopher Nicholas Rescher of the University of Pittsburgh has noted (in his 1978 essay, "Philosophical Disagreements") — a triad of inconsistent claims chases each other by their tails, none ever gaining full ascendency:

(4) We can only truly be said to know what is absolutely certain — not merely what is beyond any "reasonable" doubt (as the law courts would have it), but what is "free from every doubt —/ All probable, possible shadow of doubt —/All possible doubt whatever!" (as Gilbert and Sullivan put it in "The Gondoliers").
(5) We do know various facts about the world.
(6) We can never be absolutely certain about anything, because of the possibility (perhaps not a "reasonable" one, but at least a bare "shadow" of one) of an "evil demon" (as Descartes called it) who can deceive us about anything.

Author's Note: The ideas presented here (and in more detail in my article in the *American Philosophical Quarterly* 19 (1982)) arose from discussions during my participation in an NEH Pilot Grant at the College at Fredonia on the "Humanistic Component of General-Liberal Education," Summer 1981.

☐ Or consider the family of logical paradoxes, of which the Liar Paradox is perhaps the most famous: Suppose I say to you, "I am now lying." Am I lying or am I telling the truth when I say that? If I', telling the truth, then — as I said — I'm lying (and, so, I'm *not* telling the truth). But if I'm in fact lying, then you should believe the *opposite* of what I said; so, I'm *not* lying. Put as an inconsistent triad, we have:

(7) The Liar Sentence is either true or else it is false.
(8) The Liar Sentence isn't true (for if it were, it would be false).
(9) The Liar Sentence isn't false (for if it were, it would be true).

While there have been many attempts to solve this problem, it can safely be said that there is no *single* solution which is universally accepted — there are at least two or three (mutually inconsistent ones, of course!) which are highly popular, and dozens of others each with their champions.

Pick up virtually any volume of virtually any philosophical journal, and you will see articles defending — and attacking — each of the possible positions on these and similar issues. No one ever seems to "win." The problems never seem to be solved. Philosophy never seems to make any progress. What's the problem with philosophy?

"Philosophy has long considered itself a 'science,' yet, unlike other sciences — notably, physics and mathematics — it has never seemed to make any 'progress.' No philosopher ever seems to agree with any other."

As you can probably guess by now, philosophers have come up with several, mutually inconsistent diagnoses (and attendant prescriptions for a cure). Perhaps the most influential in recent times was the one provided by the Logical Positivist movement of the 1920s, centered around such philosophers as Moritz Schlick, Rudolf Carnap, and the other members of the Vienna Circle. Their view — much favored by "hard-headed" scientistss — was, roughly, that the "problems" of metaphysics (such as those discussed above) were unsolvable because they weren't *real* problems, only "pseudoproblems." And they were held to be *pseudo-problems because they were held to be nonsense*, or, more politely, *meaningless*: claims such as (1) through (9) above might be at most "emotionally" significant but not "literally significant," as A.J. Ayer, a British fellow-traveler of the Vienna Circle, put it in his *Language, Truth and Logic* in 1946. And if a claim had no literal significance, then it couldn't be proved true or false.

The analysis of "meaning" needed to support this view became known as the Verificationist Criterion of Meaning. One, perhaps overly simple, version of it runs as follows: a statement is meaningful insofar as it is capable of being (empirically) verified. But the Criterion grew to be ever more complicated, in order to meet ever more subtle objections, until, eventually, it crumbled under its own weight. Even so, the movement succeeded in leaving a bad taste in the mouths of many scientists for philosophy and its lack of progress.

Another description of philosophy's plight appears in Benson Mates's recent *Skeptical Essays*. Mates, a philosopher at the University of California at Berkeley, holds that philosophical problems are indeed meaningful — even "literally" so — yet unsolvable precisely *because* "the reasons given on both sides of the issues are equally good" and thus no *one* solution is capable of being universally accepted. Where the Logical Positivists argued that philosophical problems were unsolvable because they were *meaningless*, Mates argues that they are unsolvable in spite of their being perfectly *meaningful*, and he sees a form of skepticism as being the only rational attitude to take.

There is, however, a third, more optimistic kind of view. Versions of it have been espoused by Rescher and by

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Hector-Neri Castañeda, a philosopher at Indiana University (in *On Philosophical Method*). I prefer to approach it by means of an analogy to the cognitive-developmental scheme of William G. Perry, Jr., as presented in his *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years.*

According to Perry, college students move through a sequence of "positions" reflecting their developing attitudes towards knowledge. The first position, "Basic Duality," is the view that all problems are solvable and that the student's (read, "the philosopher's" or "the scientist's") task is to learn the right solutions. "Full Dualism" comes as the student begins to see that some authorities (typically, literature and philosophy teachers) disagree on which solutions are correct — or even whether any are — while others (typically, science teachers) agree on correct solutions. The student still believes that there *are* correct solutions even though some teachers' views of them seem obscured.

As students progress to "Early Multiplicity," they decide that there are two *kinds* of problems: those whose solutions we know and those whose solutions we haven't found, *yet.* (These last two positions, by the way, are the positions of most college freshmen: they seek answers; we, the faculty, are there to provide them.) "Late Multiplicity" is the position whose oft-heard battle cry is, "Everyone has a right to his own opinion." But otherwise, some problems *are* unsolvable; with respect to these, it really doesn't matter which possible solution you opt for (or even whether you opt for one at all). This position bears a striking resemblance to Mates's brand of skepticism concerning the solvability of philosophy problems.

But college students have a few more positions to pass through (if they haven't become alienated along the way): "Contextual Relativism" comes next; here, students begin to realize that all proposed solutions are backed by reasons — they must be viewed in appropriate contexts — and that *some* are better than others, though perhaps depending on context. Following this realization, students begin to see that they must make some commitments among competing solutions, and, further along in Perry's scheme, they see that this is a never-ending task.

The third, most optimistic approach to the problem of philosophical problems (in my version, at least) sees the Perry scheme writ large upon the history of philosophical inquiry. First, we must accept that there *are* many, equally rational solutions, Second, we must realize that each solution comes with baggage: for solutions to problems are really parts of overarching *theories* which include various fundamental principles supporting the specific solution and further commitments attendant upon it. And third, we must recognize that we must *commit* ourselves to one of these theories, if only for the moment.

In this way, there can be progress in philosophy. In order to adopt a solution, one must *also* adopt — that is, be willing to commit oneself to — its "fellow-traveler" principles. Knowing what these are, knowing the full range of what we must commit ourselves to in order to solve our problems, is the essence of progress in philosophy.

Moreover, it is the essence of progress in the sciences, too — for solutions to *any* problem are theory-relative. The apparent willingness of scientists vis-a-vis philosophers to be more unified in their commitments is largely a fiction. Loud disagreements are muffled in the depths of scientific research and rarely reach "the rabble without doors" — or are misunderstood when they do. But at the boundaries of scientific research, there is as much disagreement as there is at *all* the levels of philosophical research: For the sciences, *stereotypically*, "move" in one direction, deducing consequences from fundamental and (apparently) unchallenged principles, whereas philosophy "moves," simultaneously, in two directions: like the sciences, in a "forward" direction, as well as in an apparently "backward" direction — challenging, questioning, scrutinizing any and all fundamental principles. As a result, we philosophers may have tended to be more "noisy and clamourous" than scientists, but, I like to think, we have been no less successful in coming to grips with our problems.

FURTHER READING:

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